

81 Defining relative clauses

A relative clause is a part of a sentence that gives more information about the subject. A defining, or restrictive, relative clause identifies the subject being talked about.

See also:

Non-defining relative clauses **82**

Other relative structures **83**

81.1 DEFINING RELATIVE CLAUSES

Defining relative clauses, also known as restrictive relative clauses, are used to describe exactly which person or thing the speaker is referring to. Without this information, the meaning of the sentence changes.

Here the defining clause gives essential information about people.



Here the defining clause gives essential information about a thing.



The defining clause can also go in the middle of the main clause.



FURTHER EXAMPLES

I need a television **that works!**



Do you know anyone **who knows how to fix a bike?**



He's the actor **that we saw last week.**

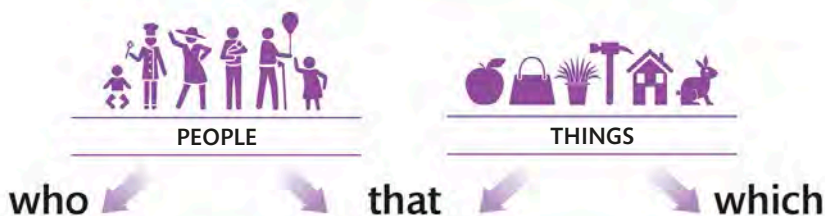


The book **that I just read** is excellent.



81.2 RELATIVE PRONOUNS

English uses different relative pronouns to talk about people and things.



81.3 SUBJECTS AND OBJECTS IN DEFINING RELATIVE CLAUSES

Relative clauses are made up of a subject, a verb, and usually an object. They usually start with a relative pronoun, which can be the subject or the object of the relative clause.

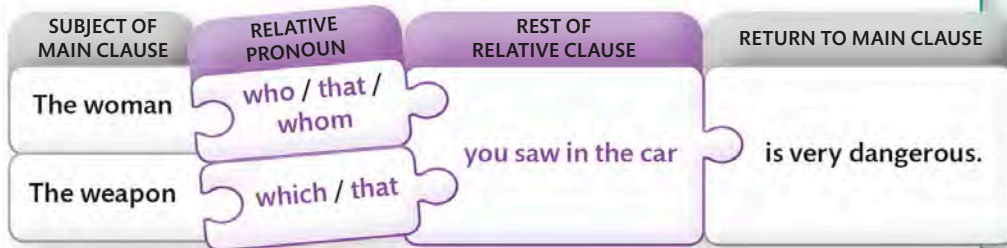


HOW TO FORM

If the relative pronoun is the subject of the relative clause, it must appear in the sentence.



If the relative pronoun is the object of the relative clause, it can be left out. "Whom" is sometimes used when a person is the object, but this is very formal.



82 Non-defining relative clauses

Like defining relative clauses, non-defining relative clauses add extra information about something. However, this simply gives extra detail, rather than changing the sentence's meaning.

See also:

Quantity 75

Defining relative clauses 81

82.1 NON-DEFINING RELATIVE CLAUSES

In non-defining relative clauses, also known as non-restrictive relative clauses, "who" is used to refer to people. "Whom" can be used if the person is the object of the relative clause, but this is very formal.

MAIN CLAUSE NON-DEFINING RELATIVE CLAUSE

We spoke to Linda, **who had recently been mugged.**

"Who" refers to a person.



"Which" is used to refer to anything that is not a person. "That" is sometimes used instead of "which," but this is often considered wrong in non-defining relative clauses.

MAIN CLAUSE NON-DEFINING RELATIVE CLAUSE RETURN TO MAIN CLAUSE

Her necklace, **which she'd just bought,** was stolen.

"Which" refers to a thing.



FURTHER EXAMPLES

Jay, **who I used to live with,** came to stay with us for a few days.



The suspect, **whom we had been following,** was arrested.



"Whom" is only used in very formal situations.

All the burglars were arrested, **which was a great relief.**



Our new house, **which is by the beach,** is beautiful.

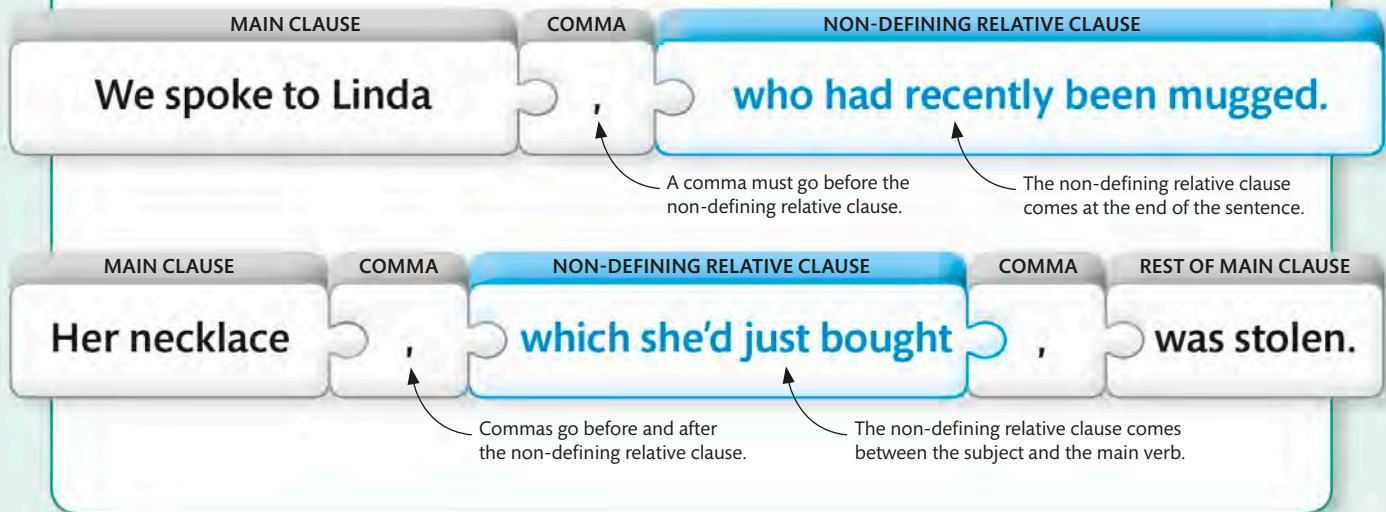


The relative pronoun can refer to the entire previous clause.

HOW TO FORM

Non-defining relative clauses can come in the middle of a sentence, or at the end.

If the relative clause comes in the middle, commas must go either side of it. If it comes after the whole main clause, a comma must go at the end of the main clause.



82.2 QUANTIFIERS WITH NON-DEFINING RELATIVE CLAUSES

In non-defining relative clauses, quantifiers can be used to say how many people or things the relative clause refers to. In these structures, "who" becomes "of whom," and "which" becomes "of which."

QUANTIFIER + OF + WHOM

I teach many students, **all of whom** are very talented.



QUANTIFIER + OF + WHICH

I teach many classes, **some of which** are very difficult.



FURTHER EXAMPLES

My brother and sister, **both of whom** live in Ireland, are coming to visit.



Lots of people, **many of whom** are famous, will be at the event.



I have four essays due next week, **none of which** are ready.



Tommy has three pets, **two of which** are cats.



83 Other relative structures

Relative words introduce phrases that describe a noun in the main part of the sentence. Different relative words are used to refer to different types of nouns.

See also:

Singular and plural nouns 69

Possession 80

83.1 "WHERE," "WHEN," AND "WHEREBY"

"Where" is the relative word used to refer to a place.

That is the place **where** the judge sits.

[The judge sits there.]



"When" is the relative word used to refer to a time.

He is looking forward to the day **when** he'll be released from prison.

[He's looking forward to the day of his release.]



"Whereby" is the relative word used to refer to a process.

A trial is the process **whereby** a person is found guilty or innocent of a crime.

[To be found guilty, you must go through a trial process.]



FURTHER EXAMPLES

This is the house **where** Shakespeare was born.



Dean is out at the moment. I'm not sure **where** he is.



I remember the day **when** you were born.



Next month is **when** the new students are starting.



They have an agreement **whereby** they share the company's profits.



There's a new system **whereby** students submit their work online.



83.2 "WHOSE"

"Whose" is the relative word used to show possession or belonging.

This is the lawyer **whose** client lied in court.

[This lawyer's client lied in court.]



FURTHER EXAMPLES

The UK is an example of a country **whose** traffic laws are very strict.



Smith & Smith, **whose** success rate is very high, is a respected law firm.



83.3 "WHAT"

"What" is the relative word used to mean "the thing which" or "the things which."

This house is just **what** we were looking for.

[This house is the thing which we were looking for.]



FURTHER EXAMPLES

I don't know **what** it is, but I'm excited to open it!



These paintings are **what** I've been spending all my time on.



⚠ COMMON MISTAKES WORD ORDER WITH RELATIVE STRUCTURES

If a relative structure uses a question word such as "where" or "what," the word order in the clause following this word should be left as normal and should not be formed like a question.

This is just **what we were** looking for. ✓

This is correct.

This is just **what were we** looking for. ✗

Do not invert the subject and verb.

84 Question words with “-ever”

Adding “-ever” to question words changes their meaning. These words can be adverbs or determiners in their own clauses, or they can join two clauses together.

See also:

Articles **63** Singular and plural nouns **69**

Adverbs of manner **98**

84.1 QUESTION WORDS WITH “-EVER”

Words ending “-ever” are most commonly used to mean “it doesn’t matter what,” “I don’t know,” or to say that the options are unrestricted. They can be used as subjects and objects.



I’m still going to the game, **whatever** the weather’s like.

[It doesn’t matter what the weather is like. I’m still going.]



We can take a taxi or walk, **whichever** you prefer.

[It doesn’t matter to me which you choose, taxi or walking.]

Here, “whichever” is an object.



Whoever invented the umbrella was a very clever person.

[I don’t know who invented the umbrella, but they were very clever.]

Here, “whoever” is a subject.



We’ll reschedule for **whenever** the sun comes out next.

[I don’t know when it will be, but we’ll reschedule for the next time it’s sunny.]



I always check the forecast for **wherever** I’m going to be.

[I check the forecast for the place I am going to be, no matter where it is.]



I’m sure you’ll arrive on time, **however** you decide to travel.

[No matter which mode of transportation you choose, I’m sure you’ll be on time.]

FURTHER EXAMPLES

Whatever he tells you,
just ignore it.



Feel free to call in to see us
whenever you're in town.



Whichever you choose, you'll
have to spend a lot of money.



Wherever we end up going this
summer, I know it'll be great.



Whoever did this painting
is a very talented artist.



However he managed to break it,
I'm not sure we'll be able to fix it.



84.2 "WHICHEVER" AND "WHATEVER" AS DETERMINERS

"Whichever" and "whatever" can come before nouns to show that the options are unspecified.



I'm sure you'll love **whichever** dog you choose.

[It doesn't matter which dog you choose, you'll love it.]



If you need help for **whatever** reason, just let me know.

[It doesn't matter what the reason is, let me know if you need help.]

84.3 OTHER USES OF "WHENEVER" AND "HOWEVER"

"Whenever" can also mean "every time that."



It always seems to rain **whenever** I go away.

[Any time I go away, it rains.]

"However" is often used before an adjective,
as an adverb, to mean "to whatever extent."



If there's a chance of rain, **however** small, I'll take an umbrella.

[I'll take an umbrella, no matter how small the risk of rain.]